DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 150 565 CS 003 941

AUTHOR Wilson, Molly M.
TITLE Future Shock and the Aged: Is Reading a Cure or Part of the Problem?
PUB DATE Dec 77
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Reading Conference (27th, New Orleans, Louisiana, December 1-3, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adjustment (to Environment); *Adjustment Problems; Adult Reading Programs; *Information Dissemination; Leisure Time; *Older Adults; *Reading; Reading Improvement; Reading Interests; *Senior Citizens

ABSTRACT

This paper suggests that reading offers a partial solution to the adaptation problems that older adults must face. Reading materials provide a means of disseminating information among older adults, and offer a source for consumer services information and basic education in living for those adjusting to retirement or old age. In addition, reading can be a leisure activity or a means of group interaction. The paper advocates establishing reading groups in nursing homes and retirement centers, designing basic reading courses specifically for adults, and producing more books of interest for the elderly population. (MAI)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

FUTURE SHOCK AND THE AGED: IS READING A CURE OR PART OF THE PROBLEM?

Molly M. Wilson
University of Georgia

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Molly M. Wilson

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

ED150565

INTRODUCTION

Future shock, Alvin Toffler's term for culture shock in one's own society, is "the shattering stress and disorientation induced in individuals by subjecting them to too much change in too short a time." This rapid rate of change has left all members of society with the problem of adaptability. For the elderly, the shock is in many ways greater than for younger people because they have been witness to many more changes than the younger generations. In addition, time passes more quickly for the elderly and the ability - or perhaps the desire - to adjust to change wanes. For the elderly who are moving from a position as functioning members of society to retirement, adaptation problems may be magnified as they struggle to adapt to both a new life style and a fast moving society. These things, taken together, magnify the effects of future shock on the elderly. Withdrawal, disorientation, depression are the effects of future shock.

While reading is no elixir, it can serve to assuage the adaptation problems of the elderly. Reading, as a means of information dissemination, can serve to increase consumer awareness among the elderly. Recreational reading can be a method of passing the empty hours of retirement. Paradoxically, however, because of the very complex nature of our society, the very products available for reading contribute in some ways to the adaptation problems of the aged.

CONSUMER INFORMATION FOR THE ELDERLY

In their adaptation to retirement, the elderly are faced with all types of problems. These problems are widely varied, and the specific ones facing each person depend on the level of sophistication with which he reads.

(Paper presented at the National Reading Conference, New Orleans, December, 1977.)

CS003941

One-fifth of all people over 65 are functional illiterates (Eklund: 1969). This group of aged people suffer the greatest adaptation problems in retirement, for the very business of life requires that one be able to read. Social security, Medicare, and insurance forms require ability to read. So the very basis of getting an income in retirement revolves around reading, and being able to read with a fairly high level of proficiency. More courses for the illiterate elderly should be established so that they can function effectively in this highly verbal society.

For the average elderly person, reading offers a means for getting consumer information. Haworth (1955) found that the elderly expressed an interest in adult education courses focused on consumer information. Yet few courses are available that focus directly on the needs and interests of the aged, or that meet during the day when they would feel free to attend.

Also, in a fast-changing society, written materials provide a natural way to disseminate information. The newspaper is the most widely read by the elderly (Sharon: 1973). So, it offers a perfect way to inform people of all sorts of things - con artists who prey on the elderly, the ins and outs of insurance policies and payments, new food products, energy saving devices. All these can be advertised through the newspapers. New medicines and free clinics, information on swine flu vaccine, and other social and emergency services can be introduced to the elderly through the newspaper, also.

Finally, a small and very select group of the elderly are reading consumers in a very special way. They use the free tuition benefits now available in most states and take college courses. Kauffman (1974) talks of the Donovan free tuition program in Kentucky, which is one of the oldest programs in the United States. Most participants are retired teachers. While only 7% of all the elderly in the U.S. have college degrees, 45% of the Donovan participants do. So, this type of program, which uses reading

to provide knowledge for knowledge's sake, appeals to only a small proportion of the elderly. Yet, it is one of the few services provided uniformly by all states to the elderly. While the program is very successful, it is used by so few. However, classes in basic reading instruction for the illiterate and consumer education for the average elderly are more needed. Haworth (1969) found 70% of the aged expressed educational needs. With such a large expressed need, certainly more can be done.

READING AS A LEISURE ACTIVITY

Aside from serving an important function as an information service, reading also aids the adaptation of the elderly by serving as a leisure time activity. Reading serves as both a solitary activity and as a means for group activity.

The elderly, retired from the working world and suffering some amount of physical disability, have many adjustment problems. For retirees, there is no need to lead a scheduled life anymore; time weighs heavy while society whirls on at a rapid pace. Inactivity breeds future shock and withdrawal. Gerontologists call this disengagement. Whichever label is used, reading is seen as an alternative, a way to keep the mind active and pass hours alone (Cassata: 1967). Depression and neuroticism that could result from withdrawal from society are prevented through reading.

Secondly, reading groups can serve as a means for staying active and interacting with others. The time spent interacting with others who share an interest in reading can be enjoyable as well as therapeutic. Lovelace (1977) conducted a reading group for elderly residents of a nursing home and found the sessions to be good therapy for participants. Not all the participants were literate, but all viewed the group as a means of remaining active and as something to look forward to. Wilson (1977) conducted a group in a retirement center, comprised of healthy and avid readers. Her findings are similar. The group provided a scheduled weekly activity for the elderly.

Reading was actually the springboard for a group social hour. No reading was done in the meetings, and little reading was discussed. Reading served as the common interest to gather people for social interaction.

So, reading as a leisure activity serves as a useful tool to overcome adaptation problems. Whether reading alone to pass empty hours, or participating in a group and interacting with others, reading is an important answer to adaptation problems for the elderly.

READING: A PART OF THE PROBLEM

As with most things in our society, the means for a solution serves as part of the problem, also. Written materials are being produced at an astounding rate in this country. Yet the rate of production and the products marketed raise three problems for discussion.

First, the cost of publishing is skyrocketing. This leads to a substantial increase in the price of written materials. For the elderly who have limited incomes, the prices make owning books prohibitive in many cases. Avid, lifelong readers will find a means to get reading material, usually by swapping books with friends or children. But the cost of magazines and newspaper subscriptions makes these materials scarce in the homes of even the most avid readers. New library services such as residential bookmobiles, retirement center libraries, and the free materials for the disabled reader available to local libraries from the Library of Congress are an attempt to make reading materials readily available. But, are they enough?

Second, one must examine the reading materials that are available and ask if they are of interest to the elderly. The National Survey of Library Services to the Aging (1971) found that most library services focus on children, while less than 2% of all funds are spent on the elderly. The American Library Association publishes only one booklist, Paths to a Long Life, that lists books of interest to the elderly. Yet, an examination of

this list shows no recreational listings. All books on the list provide consumer information, which is certainly needed, but is not enough in and of itself.

Schramm (1969) found that the elderly spend 45% of their time in media activities. Yet, the median number of hours spent in reading was one hour a day, or about 7% of their total time. So little time in reading - Why? Part of the problem may lie in the fact that available materials do not appeal to the elderly - a paradox in the society that is producing written materials faster than ever before in history.

Kingston (1977) suggests that the nature of materials available might cut down on the time the elderly spend in reading. Few magazines appeal to the elderly - National Geographic, Readers Digest - and as stated earlier, cost often prohibits subscribing. Elderly men cannot identify with the fictional male protagonist who is young and virile. Elderly women prefer light romances with no sex and dislike mystery and science fiction (Romani: 1970). One must ask if these types of materials are readily available. A quick look at the book racks in stores, and knowledge that U.S. libraries spend so little money on the elderly lead one to suspect the answer is "no."

Third, reading presents another, quite different problem that exemplifies some of the problems of future shock. This is a basic comprehension problem brought on by the fast change in vocabulary. Of 450,000 usable words in our language, only 250,000 would have been intelligible to Shakespeare four centuries ago. (Toffler: 1970) Terms like fastback, wash and wear, flashcube, and intercom appear as new words in reading material. Reading is impeded by new vocabulary, resulting in basic comprehension problems.

While conducting the reading group in Athens, Georgia, this writer was contacted by an elderly woman who said she needed a reading tutor. An avid reader, she was to read a magazine article and report on it for her mission

society. She felt defeated because the article made no sense to her. The article was about her church's new evangelistic mission program that was beaming radio programs via Telestar to Iron Curtain countries. A quick explanation of the electronic concepts involved in the project transformed a defeated woman into the good reader she really was. The simple comprehension problem, grounded in lack of background experience and vocabulary, was easily remedied. This is just one example of what many elderly people who are good readers face when they find themselves bogged down in Time Magazine, the newspaper, or even the church missionary magazine.

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

Adaptation problems exist for the elderly and rise from two sources. First, the shift from being employed and raising a family to retirement causes problems. Second, this change in lifestyle is aggravated by the fast-pace and constant change, the future shock, in society. Both factors contribute to the withdrawal and adaptation problems of the elderly.

Reading offers solutions. It can be a means of disseminating information. However, society has fallen short in providing any sorely-needed consumer services or basic education in living for the elderly. While free college courses are now being offered to senior citizens, these meet the interests and needs of only a small, select group of the elderly who still fit the patterns of the active, younger society. The rest of the elderly are virtually overlooked.

Reading also offers a leisure activity. It is a viable means for dealing with both future shock and disengagement in the aged, serving both as a solitary activity and as a means for group interaction. Here, again, while inroads are being made through some few agencies, much work has not even begun. The services of the Library of Congress need to be advertised; they are unknown to a majority of librarians and elderly at present. More

reading groups in nursing homes and retirement centers must be established. And certainly a society that produces so many written materials can publish books of interest to the elderly.

Reading is offered as at least a partial solution for the adaptation problems of the elderly. It is time to begin making headway in using reading as a method of helping the elderly adjust to a new lifestyle in a rapidly changing world.

REFERENCES

Cassata, M.B. A study of the mass communications behavior and the social disengagement behavior of 177 members of the Age Center of New England, Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Indiana University, 1967.

Eklund, L. Aging and the field of education, in M.W. Riley (Ed.) Aging and Society (Vol. 2) New York: Russell Sage Foundation. 1969.

Haworth, W.H. The expressed educational needs of older-age adults in two senior centers, Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Stanford University, 1955.

Kauffman, E. The new generation of college students, unpublished paper presented for Dean's Reception, Fairleigh Dickinson University, Madison, N.J. April, 1974.

Kingston, A. J. Reading and the aged: A statement of the problem. Unpublished paper presented at the International Reading Association Convention, Miami, Florida, May, 1977.

Lovelace, T. Enhancing the lives of nursing home patients through reading activities, Unpublished paper presented at the International Reading Association Convention, Miami, Florida, May, 1977.

National Survey of Library Services to the Aging, Cleveland Public Library, U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Office of Education, Bureau of Libraries and Educational Technology, December, 1971. ED067 521.

Romani, D. Guidelines for library services to the institutionalized aging, American Libraries, 1970, 1, 286 - 289

Schramm, W. Aging and mass communication, in M.W. Riley (Ed.) Aging and Society (Vol. 2) New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1969.

Sharon, A.T. What do adults read? Reading Research Quarterly, 1973, 9, 148 - 169.

Toffler, A. Future Shock. New York: Random House. 1970.

Wilson, M.M. Enhancing the lives of aged in a retirement center through a program of reading. Unpublished paper presented at the International Reading Association Convention, Miami, Florida, 1977.